

Duxbury's Storied History of 'Horse Sense'

By TONY KELSO

Horses have figured into Duxbury's history since the founding of the town in 1637. Originally horses were brought to New England by the Plymouth colonists. There were few in this area in the early years because of the expense and danger of crossing from England. Myles Standish and Elder William Brewster were some of the first residents who by the 1640s had horses in Duxbury. The distances to Boston and Plymouth were covered more often in boats at first than by horses. By the end of the 17th century horses were more common and used for work such as plowing and hauling as well as for travel.

A glimpse of the dangers of



horseback riding can be seen in 1669 when 24-year-old John Pabodie of Duxbury was fatally injured when his horse rode under a low hanging tree branch, "violently forcing his head into his body which thereof did brake his skull." Whether the horse was spooked or this was a case of 17th century youthful drag racing we will never know, but dangers like that were ever



Camp Chappa Challa was known for its horseback riding program in the 1930s.

present around horses.

The most famous Duxbury horse is "Honest Dick," who has a monument raised to his memory. The King Caesar Weston family were tough business people but they clearly had great affection for Honest Dick, who worked for them for 40 years in the cellar of the Weston rope walk on Powder Point. He died in 1846 while still circling around and around to make the cordage for the Weston ships. Honest Dick's brick monument originally stood between Russell Road and the King Caesar house, near the site of the rope-walk that was demolished in 1850. The monument was moved in 1886 when the land was sold and developed into summer house lots. The monument stands today at the corner of Bay Pond Road and Powder Point Ave, a testament to a horse "who faithfully served three generations."

The Wright family of St. George Street also had great affection for their horses. William Wright, second husband of Georgianna Wright, in particular was enamored with horse racing. He raced them on St. George Street winter and summer, and the shape of Onion Hill Road today is an echo of his trotting track for his steeds. They had a colt barn and a stable off of Pine Hill Avenue that were worth in 1901 five times more than the average Duxbury house at the time. These barns were apparently paneled in expensive wood such as mahogany. They also had a horse graveyard on their estate with bronze markers set in stone for their favorite horses. In 1901 sixteen horses lived the luxurious life on the Wright estate.

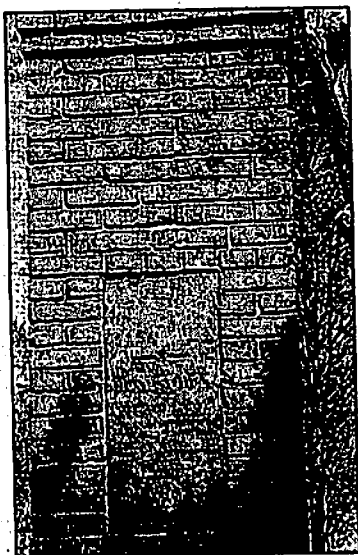
In fact, in 1901 Duxbury, 438 horses were assessed, for a town with a population of less than 2,000 people. Their barns, stables and sheds still dot our landscape, including foundations that can be found in our woods where once there were farms.

"Horseless carriages" began to make their impact in Duxbury through the 1910s. In 1912 there were still 349 horses in Duxbury, but only eight years later in 1920 that number dropped to 176, and then by 1924 still lower to 118 horses.

As Duxbury grew as a place to spend the summer, so did the number of horse related establishments that sprung up to cater to the summer people's needs. Cushing's stable in Hall's Corner, MacNaught's livery on St. George Street and Brigg's stable on the Bluefish River were just some of the businesses that boarded horses for the summer people and rented out horses, wagons and barges for people coming into town on the train. Blacksmiths were scattered about Duxbury from High Street to Washington Street and like a good car mechanic today, people relied upon an honest smith for their horses.

By Duxbury's 300th anniversary in 1937, there were 29 registered horses in town. There were several riding schools for those who wanted to learn or who wanted to take horses out through the shady bridle trails that crisscrossed the town. Shapeleigh's North Hill stable was on West Street near the present police station, Churchill's was off Chestnut Street near the old railroad tracks and Camp Chappa Challa on Powder Point was known for its riding program on Duxbury Beach.

As the Board of Health's subcommittee on stables and regulations begin their deliberations, let's hope our town's long history of "horse sense" will continue to be part of the understanding of Duxbury's agrarian past.



A monument of the horse Honest Dick stands on Powder Point Ave. Photo courtesy of "Duxbury, A Guide" published by DR&HS.